DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 138 CG 024 204

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TITLE Listening to Adolescents.
PUB DATE 27 Sep 91
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Association of Louisiana Evaluators (New Orleans, LA, September 27, 1992).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Decision Making; Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; *Pregnancy; *Prevention; Secondary School Students; *Sex Education

ABSTRACT

Generally, teenage pregnancy is considered a detriment to society. Louisiana has the third highest rate of adolescent pregnancy of any state in the nation. The Louisiana Sex Education in Public Schools Act (1979) effectively prohibits information about the human reproductive system until the seventh grade. The basic "Choices and Changes" program is an economic social studies program designed to teach students the possible consequences of alternative forms of behavior. Since the majority of adolescent pregnancies are a matter of choice, the consequences of parenthood became an integral part of this program. The pregnancy component was designed for use beginning in the third grade. This meant that the consequences of pregnancy had to be taught without explaining how pregnancy occurred. The goals of the program had to be limited to teaching students how to make choices and the possible consequences of those choices. Proper presentation of the program is vital. Students feel empowered when they are asked for their ideas and are treated nonjudgmentally. An evaluation of the class indicated teachers were constantly interrupted by students who were taken out of class. To teach a class such as the pregnancy alternative component, the teacher must have group leadership skills. Finally, when students learn to value an education as a viable choice over parenthood, programs such as "Choices and Changes" will have far more impact. (LLL)

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Listening to Adolescents

Presented to the
Association of Louisiana Evaluators
September 27, 1991
New Orleans, Louisiana

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Listening to Adolescents

ABSTRACT

Louisiana has the third highest rate of adolescent pregnancy of any state in the nation (Vital Statistics of Louisiana, 1986). Food for thought for both pro-choice and pro-life organizations is that 40% of these pregnancies are ended by abortion. Since it is doubtful that young women deliberately become pregnant so they can "experience" abortion, lack of guidance by parents and teachers would seem to be the most likely cause of unwanted pregnancies.

An evaluation of the economic education program "Choices and Changes" provided the information for this paper. Choices and Changes attempts to teach children that their actions cause effects. Since parenthood is an effect of long-term consequences, a component of the program encourages free and open discussion among students about the economic results of pregnancy.

The authors wish to present their observations of: (1) student participation in the dialogue about parenthood, and (2) the difficulty of presenting any material to pupils that might run afoul of Louisiana's sex education law. The evaluators learned a great deal about students' attitudes and wish to share them. They also discovered that taboos surrounding sexual discussion may be a root cause of the poverty cycle. No opinion is offered on the abortion conflict since the investigators feel that this issue would disappear with the elimination of unwanted pregnancies.

Introduction

One of the main battlegrounds of the pro-choice -- pro-life forces has been the steps of the Capital Building in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The authors of this paper do not think that a woman becomes pregnant so she can "experience" abortion. Probably the most pro-life AND pro-choice person is the expectant mother. To walk through a line of well-meaning people calling her names, to a clinic where she knows she will suffer both physical pain and mental anguish, cannot be a pleasant episode. Yet this same woman knows she cannot take care of a child. Perhaps she is only 12 years old and still in grade school. What chance would the child have? She is the victim of unwanted pregnancy. If only the pro-choice -- pro-life forces would pour as much money and energy into preventing unwanted pregnancies as they do into fighting one and other, our country might be able to conquer the growing problem of a permanent underclass.

Louisiana has the third highest rate of adolescent pregnancy of any state in the nation (Vital Statistics of Louisiana, 1986). One of the reasons for this unenviable record is the archaic attitude towards sex

education in the state. Teaching of sex education is prohibited in every parish except Orleans[1] until the seventh grade. Many seventh-graders are already sexually active and yet they have little knowledge of the consequences of their actions.

Lack of knowledge is a large cause of unwanted pregnancies. Martha Ward in her account of the 10-year experiment in family planning in Louisiana cites some of the myths that existed about birth control. This folklore included religious prohibition, male attitudes, and beliefs that poor black women could not learn to effectively use birth control methods (Ward, 1986). Dr. Ward also points out that poor women DID want to learn how to prevent pregnancy and were able to use birth control methods very effectively when they acquired the knowledge to control their reproductive destinies.

This paper is not concerned with family planning except as it relates to the sex component of the program "Choices and Changes." There are many other references on general family planning. For readers wishing to know more on the subject, the authors would suggest "Poor Women, Powerful Men" (Ward, 1986). The

study is concerned with the effects on society of an uncontrolled growth of an at-risk population.

In addition to reinforcing the many warnings issued today about the increase in teen-age parenthood, the authors would like to tell a story. The story involves the difficulty of writing a curriculum that does not run afoul of the stringent Louisiana sex education law. The story also involves the description of a classroom where students were encouraged to discuss, on their own, the economic ramifications of parenthood.

Societal Effects of Adolescent Parenthood

Few, if any, benefits accrue in today's society from adolescent parenthood. Possibly a case could be made for superior health of extremely youthful mothers but statistics do not seem to bear this out.

Generally, teen age pregnancy is considered a detriment to society. The noted economist and educator Henry Levin pointed out that the at-risk population will increase disproportionally without appropriate educational interventions (Levin, 1989). If a child is unfortunate enough to have a parent unable or unwilling to participate in his or her education, the child has

very little chance of ever escaping from William Julius Wilson's description of "The Truly Disadvantaged" (Wilson, 1987). Teen age parents are not usually emotionally or educationally prepared to help THEIR children with school.

Martha Misik wrote the Alternatives to Parenthood curriculum. Quotes from Curriculum Design follow:

> The Alternatives to Parenthood curriculum materials were designed to be used as on going components of Choices and Changes. Utilizing the rationale for Choices and Changes which states....."If America's young people are our greatest national resource, then America's dropout problem is our greatest national tragedy."---the project was supported by data which suggests that pregnancy is the most common reason for teens to drop out of school. Additional support research indicated that teenage child bearing is costly both in direct expenditures for health and social services that society must bear, and in the loss of economic contribution that teen parents might have made if their educational and vocational choices had not been limited by early parenthood.

Writing the Program

The basic Choices and Changes program is an economic social studies program designed to teach students the possible consequences of alternative forms of behavior. Since the majority of adolescent pregnancies are a matter of choice, the consequences of the parenthood became an integral part of this program. The program was written for nationwide distribution while the pregnancy component was Louisiana specific (although it is applicable nationwide).

Writing a course on alternatives to parenthood for use in Lousiana public schools was no easy chore. The Louisiana Sex Education in Public Schools Act (1979) effectively prohibits information about the human reproductive system until the seventh grade. The pregnancy component was designed for use beginning in the third grade. This meant that the consequences of pregnancy had to be taught without explaining how pregnancy occurred.

The goals of the program had to be limited to teaching students how to make choices and the possible consequences of those choices. The generalization was: "people can make choices," the student message was: "I

can make choices." In addition to the value of economic choice, teachers were encouraged to discuss the fact that babies in the family created additional work.

How much effect these very bland statements had upon the attitudes of adolescent girls when they were first confronted with the choice of sexual intercourse is unknown but at least the program was in place. If the story ended here most readers would conclude that another attempt had been made to alter attitudes on adolescent pregnancy but would probably fail due to repressive legislation. In this case a teacher made the difference.

Action in the Classroom

During the spring semester of 1990 Charles E. Gifford was hired to do an evaluation of the Choices and Changes program. John H. DeGolyer was a graduate student at the time and did his evaluation practicum on Choices and Changes. Data for this evaluation were gathered by observation, interview, and survey.

A major limitation was discovered shortly after the first observations were made. The spring semester of the participating school district involves extensive

testing. Teachers were constantly interrupted as students were taken out of class. As a result only one of the teachers completed all the lessons and the lesson that suffered the most was the pregnancy alternative component (PAC). Attending a class of the teacher who presented the PAC convinced this evaluator that, properly taught, the pregnancy alternative component of Choices and Changes could have a powerful effect on students.

The purpose of the observed lesson was to point out that taking care of a baby requires a great deal of effort. Each girl in the class was given a small rag doll and told to treat the doll just the way you would treat a baby. The rules were:

1. The doll must never be left alone.
2. The doll was to have regular feeding.
3. The doll would have to be regularly changed.
4. The doll could not be carried in a manner that a baby might be hurt. In other words, the doll could not be put in a pocket or a pocketbook as that would not be the way a mother would treat a child.

5. The mother was responsible at all times. The girls were encouraged to have their boy friends share the duties. Boys could baby sit, help with feeding and changing, and perform any other duties that would be part of a father's normal role. However, the child was the ultimate responsibility of the mother. This may appear to put unequal pressure on the girls but the fact is that only women can become mothers.

This evaluator observed the class after the girls had "taken care" of the dolls for one day. The purpose of the exercise was to point out to the girls that maybe they weren't ready for the responsibilities of motherhood. The topics of the class discussion were the choices, the changes, and the alternatives to motherhood. Three questions were asked of the students:

1. What are the advantages of having a child?
2. What are the disadvantages of having a child?
3. What could you do not to have a child?

Student replies to the advantages of having a child included statements such as "To keep my boyfriend," "To have something (not someone) to love,"

and "To get even with my mother." Other responses were offered but these three became the consensus of the class.

A lively exchange took place over the first advantage offered. One of the girls pointed out that having a child would probably cost you your boyfriend anyway. She said that boyfriends don't stay around after the child is born. A boy stated that he could never be sure if he was the real father (the identity of the mother, however, is always known). Discussion then focused on whether an adolescent parent could get a new boyfriend. The girls agreed that they could get a new boyfriend but the new boyfriend would want a child of his own. There appeared to be peer pressure on the girls in this class to become mothers.

Listing "To get even with my mother" as an advantage of becoming an adolescent parent seemed unusual to this observer. In later discussions it was explained that this student reaction is not unusual. Many of these children are the progeny of adolescent parents and are often told what a burden they were to the whole family. Instead of thinking that having a child of their own will make the family situation

worse, they consider pregnancy a rebellious act. Rebellion in teenagers is normal, but to break the cycle of poverty adolescent children of adolescent parents must find a means of expression other than pregnancy.

When asked about the disadvantages of having a child the three most popular responses were "Couldn't go out and have fun," "Would probably lose boyfriend anyway," and "Children cost a lot of money." It was interesting to observe that the class spent longer in determining the disadvantages of parenthood than they did in offering advantages. Possibly the students have spent little time in discussing the drawbacks to adolescent parenting.

This observer noticed that the most discussed disadvantage of having a child was "Couldn't go out and have fun." There was no mention of staying in school so they could get a better job. Perhaps one of the reasons for not equating school with good jobs is that pupils don't see high school graduates from their schools getting jobs. American business is presently crying out for educational reform but they are not providing employment for graduates of the school

system. This may be a "chicken -- egg" problem with business wanting trainable workers and schools needing incentive for students. The impression of this evaluator was that pupils considered going to school at least as distasteful as taking care of a child. They know that school is no fun but they are not sure of the difficulties of parenthood.

When asked what they could do not to have a child the responses were quick and unanimous. The students chose: (1) birth control pills, (2) abortion, and (3) condoms. No one mentioned abstinence as a viable alternative. (For those who think they can teach abstinence, please do). Peer pressure is far stronger to have sexual intercourse than it is to abstain.

Discussion

Will economic education reduce adolescent parenthood? By itself, certainly not. With attitudinal changes of legislators, proper presentation, and positive rewards for students completing school, the pregnancy alternative component of Choices and Changes could have a powerful effect.

While it would be wonderful to think that people always act for the good of society regardless of economic consequences, this is simply not true. California voters were given a choice between economics and the environment with several propositions in the 1990 election. Economics won every time.

If the Louisiana Legislature needs an economic reason to change their attitude on sex education in the state, they should consider the following: In 1981 the Louisiana Division of Policy, Planning, and Evaluation determined that for each dollar that was expended on family planning the state saved $14.60 in unwanted pregnancy costs (Ward, 1986).

Proper presentation of the program is vital. Self-help programs all use the technique of participant input and decision making. Students feel empowered when they are asked for their ideas and are treated nonjudgmentally. To teach a class such as the pregnancy alternative component, the teacher must have group leadership skills.

Finally, when students learn to value an education as a viable choice over parenthood, programs such as Choices and Changes will far more impact. Business

must provide meaningful jobs for graduates of the public school system. Society complains about the attitudes of inner city students towards schools. Why would their attitude be good when they are asked to give up a large portion of their childhood to prepare themselves to earn economic benefits and find there are no jobs? Why not just get pregnant, make your boyfriend happy, your mother mad, and drop out of school? What good is school anyway?

Notes

1. The 1990 Louisiana Legislature amended the Sex Education Act to allow Orleans Parish to teach sex education to students as early as the third grade. Since Orleans Parish has the highest rate of adolescent pregnancy this is a step, albeit a small one, in the right direction.

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